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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **National Identities After 2011: Interrogating the Politics of Culture and Relations of Soft Power in the Maghrib**

Notwithstanding its prominent place in diplomatic discourse, development policy, and to an extent everyday parlance, the concept of ‘soft power’ and the set of operations it incorporates have featured minimally in contemporary scholarship with regard to the Maghrib and it has mainly been used to describe foreign policy of national states (see for example Saaf 2016; Zaghlami 2017). Understandable as this oversight may be, for reasons that we will touch on later, it is also deplorable for it prevents scholars working on cultural politics from grasping the specific mutations within power relations as these affect experiences of identity – intersecting language use, ways of acting, and modes of being – in specific settings. This collection of papers, outcome of a rewarding workshop at the Department of Political Sciences of the University of Perugia in May 2016, wishes to inaugurate an inter-disciplinary conversation about these precise mutations in the states of the Maghrib after the important events of 2011.

The collection builds on and complicates varying articulations and manifestations of soft power leading its contributors to make original, yet diverse, arguments about the phenomenon in the period in question. Harvard professor Joseph Nye coined the term to discuss the capacity of states to exercise international influence through co-optation instead of coercion (1990). Intentionally or unintentionally vague over its affinity with the notions of cultural diplomacy, public diplomacy, cultural relations on a state level, the concept of soft power constitutes the particular instantiation of cultural encounters emerging out of Cold War configurations and desires. Cold War historians have explicitly tied mid-century government initiatives of ‘cultural diplomacy’ with the aims of soft power. These initiatives included overt

agendas for cultural and student exchange, the founding and maintenance of foreign schools, the building of libraries and cultural associations run by organizations such as the Fulbright Foundation and the British Council, the funding of Arabic language magazines, world service radio broadcasting, members forums (Lee 1998), and participation in regional or international cultural festivals, among which the First Damascus International Exhibition in Syria (Martin 2016) and the Baalbek Festival in Lebanon (Stone 2003). These agendas were paired with more covert intelligence-oriented operations, such as those aimed at influencing arabophone nationally owned media through the presence of expert trainers and technical advisors (Vaughan 2002, 2005).

These agendas have assumed different shapes and entail different stakes in the post-9/11 landscape and the current phase of global market integration and neoliberal systems of governance. Hence, the democratizing aspirations of cultural encounters between the global south and the ostensibly established liberal representative democracies of the global north, as envisaged by Nye, have acquired a tone of urgency regarding educational material and the mobility of youth across geographical boundaries. This urgency has greatly affected cultural policy towards predominantly Muslim societies. Furthermore, Nisbett (2016) argues, contemporary soft power oozes corporate friendliness whereby ‘any notions of intercultural understanding and cooperation have been at best forgotten and at worst abandoned.’

For the Maghrib ‘region’, this evolution of cultural encounters between states and their former imperialist predators or current external partners has a new irrefutable milestone, the popular upheaval and political transformation of 2011 onwards that have left the countries that we, workshop participants, study in depth, in various degrees of transition out of authoritarianism. As readers of this journal are intimately familiar with,

cultural politics in post-colonial Maghribian nation-states hinged on the standardization and dissemination of the formal Arabic language (*fushḥa*, *al-lughā al-‘arabiyya*) as the pillar of nation-state building (Grandguillaume 1983, Barakat 1985) and its promotion of a ‘mono-cultural national identity’ (Wyrzten 2014), which tried to silence the various oral register of Amazigh/ Berber, Hassani, Tebu (Hoffman 2008,2010). This was a considerable shift from pre-colonial cultural and linguistic pluralism, which deeply permeated these societies (Dakhli 2004; Clancy Smith 2012) and was put to work by various colonial regimes that racialized linguistic and cultural difference for the purposes of military and political control. Colonial administrations and the system of knowledge production they instrumentalized dichotomized the Maghrib into ‘Arab’ and ‘Berber’, objectifying and operationalizing the concept of ethnicity in heretofore novel ways (Burke III).

In the post 2011 landscape, the hierarchical, but ultimately pliable, relations among all these languages, officially sanctioned and not, both continued to operate in sometimes divisive and others unifying ways and considerably shifted in other directions. Post 2011, a moment in history reductively labelled the *Arab Spring* or the *Arab Uprising* – since it was explicitly not just Arab – the wider regional history of Cold War cultural policy became exceedingly relevant to the Maghrib due to the undeniable distancing from former colonial patron France and parallel move towards institutional and linguistic contact with the anglophone world. Thus, what we suggest in this collection is that for students of the Maghrib the register and operations of soft power does not simply regurgitate past concerns but, instead, brings the Maghrib in a more intimate conversation with the mid-twentieth century arena of Anglo-American Cold War activity in the wider region of the Middle East. Anecdotally, Joseph Nye himself met Qadhafi in 2007 in the framework of a campaign led by the Monitor Group,

a consultancy firm recruited to improve Libya's international profile. Nye reported about his visit in a *New Republic* article, entitled *Tripoli Diarist*, on December 10, 2007, relating his discussion with the Libyan ruler over soft power. This shift further intensifies the Maghrib's already intimate implication in transnational contests over economic influence on a global scale. In short, the register of soft power folds older territorial divisions of the region as zones of different foreign influence (Maghrib, Levant, and so on) into a broader conglomerate forged by global market integration.

As already be evident from the above narrative, the contributors of this collection contest the premise that soft power constitutes a novel proposition for grasping either top down cultural politics or their experience bottom up but, rather, it constitutes a historical and located object of study. Hence the collection does not attempt to clarify or even reformulate a definition of *soft power* since that risks reinstating the gesture that the concept performs itself: namely, the obfuscating of a long history of unequal multi-layered encounters between countries that affect language use, cultural practices, and individual or collective experiences of identity. Even more importantly, the articles in the collection do not represent a consensus about the meaning, the potential, or the reach of soft power. While Charis Boutieri's article constructs a theoretical heritage of soft power rooted in critical theory, sociolinguistics, and cultural anthropology that strips the concept of its assertions of novelty while tracing who it affects modes of citizenship training in post-revolutionary Tunisia, Jonathan Hill's article on Morocco endorses the aspirations of soft power in terms of the dissemination of liberal democratic principles while criticizing its effectiveness in bringing about the political pluralisation it desires. Even though these two articles posit *soft power* as the relationship between Maghrib states and their Euro-American 'partners', Anna Baldinetti counters this vector with an article on Libyan policies of

linguistic and cultural distribution of the Arabic language; the article highlights the fragmentation of this Arabo-centric landscape that gives space to previously minoritarian registers after the overthrow of the Qhadafi regime. In comparison with the above articles, which are more state-centric even if they identify the role of multilateral transnational actors agencies directly or indirectly motivated by foreign ministries, Lorenzo Medici's article emphasizes this arena, represented by UNESCO. This explicitly transnational positioning reminds us of the multi-layered struggle of cultural and linguistic domination that takes place among arabophone states, bringing the Maghrib in a more intense conversation with the Gulf region. Lastly, even though most articles focus on soft power operations that sanitize or depoliticize cultural conflict, Anissa Daoudi insists on the juxtaposition of soft power with armed conflict and state violence in the context of Algeria.

Acutely aware that this is only the beginning of what we hope will become a longer conversation that remains both critical of soft power's own assertions of novelty yet cognizant of its potential to reconfigure the experience of individuals and collectivities in the Maghrib, we invite fellow researchers to conduct further empirical research and push our reflections further and deeper.

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